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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA WAIVES NEW VISA REQUIREMENTS FOR
ALBANIANS

REF: A. SKOPJE 22

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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) The Macedonian government has suspended implementation of a new (and more cumbersome) visa issuance procedure for Albanian citizens required by the Law on Foreigners, which was passed in 2006 but only came into force this year (ref A). In addition, Macedonian and Albanian officials are working on an agreement that will waive entirely visa requirements for citizens of the two countries. Coming on the heels of nearly a month of negative publicity and vocal opposition from Albanians and the eAlbanian community in Macedonia, the GOM expects the visa waiver will be formalized in an agreement to be signed by Prime Minister Gruevski and Prime Minister Berisha during Gruevski's visit to Tirana on February 18 or 19. The fact that Skopje and Tirana have reached an accommodation on this sensitive matter reflects the traditionally positive ties between the two countries End summary.

NEW VISA REGIME PROMPTS PROTESTS

[1](#)2. (SBU) As reported reftels, the entry into force of the Law on Foreigners, passed in 2006, prompted loud protests from ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, and public and private opposition in Albania. Albanians objected to the law's provisions ending the issuance of Macedonian visas at border crossings between the two countries, instead requiring Albanian travelers to obtain the visas at Macedonia's Embassy in Tirana. EU contacts in Skopje informed us that the new provisions were fully consistent with EU acquis requirements, although the EU office in Tirana told Embassy Tirana that there was no imperative to implement the requirements at this time.

REACHING ACCOMMODATION

[1](#)3. (SBU) On February 1, the leader of eAlbanian junior governing coalition partner DPA, Menduh Thaci, reported to us that -- following talks he had held with Albanian President Topi in Tirana and PM Berisha (by phone) on January 31 -- the two sides had agreed to "total visa liberalization" between Macedonia and Albania. Thaci said the GOM had decided to abolish visa requirements for Albanian citizens, and that the

details would be hammered out by expert working groups from the foreign ministries of both sides on February 4 and 5 (ref B). In the meantime, Macedonian Minister of Interior Jankuloska issued an order to border police and customs units to suspend application of the Law on Foreigners visa requirements pending finalization of the new bilateral visa agreement.

14. (SBU) A Macedonian government spokesman confirmed to us on February 5 that the working groups were making progress toward finalizing an agreement, which he expected PM Gruevski to sign with his Albanian counterpart during the former's visit to Tirana on February 18 or 19. The spokesman also confirmed that the existing visa regime, regulated under a 1997 bilateral agreement, would remain in place until the new agreement entered into force. He noted that the Macedonian parliament likely would have to ratify the new bilateral visa agreement. Local media reported on February 6 that the Macedonian and Albanian working groups had produced an agreed text liberalizing the visa regime between the two countries.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) It is clear that the Macedonian MFA missed an opportunity for a proactive PR strategy that would have explained the new visa requirements months in advance, and also missed the chance perhaps to allow travelers to acquire longer-validity, multiple-entry visas at the border in the runup to implementation in 2008. The harsh public reaction from Albanian nationals on both sides, however, gave DPA's Thaci the chance to seize on the issue as a way to bolster his sagging poll numbers and demonstrate his influence in PM Gruevski's inter-ethnic governing coalition. It also gave both Skopje and Tirana the opportunity to demonstrate

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political maturity and their traditionally strong ties as they reached an accommodation that will allow even freer travel across their respective borders.

16. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Tirana.
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